

OLD CITY AUDITORIUM
404 - 424 North Fourth Street
St. Joseph
Buchanan County
Missouri

HABS No. MO-1274

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Building Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

OLD CITY AUDITORIUM
St. Joseph, Missouri

Location: 404 - 424 North Fourth Street
St. Joseph, Buchanan County, Missouri
(All of Lots Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, Eleven,
and Twelve, in Block Forty-Four (44), Original
Town.

Present Owner: City of St. Joseph
City Hall
Eleventh and Frederick Avenue
St. Joseph, Missouri 64501

Present Use: Vacant since 1978. To be demolished in 1985.

Statement of
Significance: The St. Joseph City Auditorium was designed
by Edward Jacques Eckel, F.A.I.A., a renowned
architect in Missouri and the Nation. The
building is a rare example of a Renaissance
Revival II style building.

The architecture style, Renaissance Revival,
with ornate terra-cotta ornamentation, is rarely
found in Missouri. It is also the best known
example of this style by Edmond Jacques Eckel,
whose work began in 1869 and continued through
the third decade of this century. Eckel
designed many of the finest buildings in
Missouri, but the use of the Renaissance
Revival Style was rare, if not unique.

Date of Erection: The construction contract was let on May 18,
1905, to P. P. Buddy, Contractor. The
cornerstone was laid September 26, 1905, and
dedicated in a city-wide celebration on
September 27, 1905. The structure was
completed in 1908.

Biographical Information - Edmond J. Eckel, Architect

Edmond Jacques Eckel, the senior member of the firm, Eckel and Mann, was one of the best known architects in the west throughout which he has many public buildings, school houses, churches, business blocks and residences standing as evidence of his genius.

Eckel was born in Strasburg, Alsace, France, on June 22, 1845, the son of Philip Jacob and Caroline Louise (Schweighaeuser) Eckel. At age fourteen, he began studying architecture with a relative, preparatory to entering a school of fine arts in Paris, France. He later went to a famous center of art and was a student at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, the "best institution of its kind in the world", and there he pursued his studies diligently for four and one-half years.

Soon after graduation, he decided to try his fortune in America and in September, 1868, left Havre, France and landed in New York City, went west to Cleveland, Ohio for eight months, and then to Omaha, Nebraska. He started for Kansas City, Missouri, on business, and while enroute, on July 3, 1869, stopped in St. Joseph, Missouri, because of a railroad accident. That incident changed the course of his life, as he was deeply impressed with the town of St. Joseph, and decided to locate there. He easily obtained employment in his profession, becoming a draughtsman for Stiegers and Boettner, with whom he continued for three years.

In 1872, he was made a partner of the firm and the name became Boettner and Eckel. From 1880 to 1891, the firm was known as Eckel and Mann. He then worked alone until 1899, when he and Mr. Mann again became associated as partners.

Mr. Eckel was the architect for the St. Joseph School Board in 1896. After 1880, he drafted and was the architect for principal wholesale houses, public buildings, and residences in St. Joseph, among them being the St. Joseph Union Station, St. Joseph High School Building, St. Joseph Live Stock Exchange Building, First Baptist Church, the Elks Club, Free Public Library, Carnegie Branch Library, the Commercial Block, the buildings for the Tootle, Wheeler and Motter Mercantile Company, the C. D. Smith Drug Company, Nave-McCord Mercantile Company, Hirsch Brothers Dry Goods Company, R. L. McDonald and Company, German-American Bank Building, State Hospital for Insane No. 2, St. Joseph Gas Company Building, Logan Block, Tootle-Lemon National Bank Building, Board of Trade Building, and the Transit House.

Residences designed by Mr. Eckel included the homes of J. B. Moss, J. W. McAllister, D. L. Bartlett, Jr., H. A. Smith, S. M. Nave, J. J. Tootle, M. H. Bartlett, and N. P. Ogden.

Eckel and Mann were the architects for many public and private buildings throughout the West (Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Texas, Colorado, and Nebraska).

In 1890, they drew plans for the new City Hall at St. Louis, winning preference over thirty-seven competitors.

In 1875, Edmond Jacques Eckel married Minnie L. Schroers, and together they had four children, Edmond G., Minnie A., Elvie E., and George R. Eckel. George followed him in his profession. Edmond and Minnie Eckel and their children resided at 1324 North 24th Street in St. Joseph, and his office was located in the Corby Building. Eckel died December 12, 1934, after spending sixty-five years in St. Joseph.

Historical Information:

First efforts toward construction of a city auditorium were made in 1898, when members of the Commercial Club held a street jubilee, which netted Five Thousand Dollars (\$5,000). In 1902, a mass meeting resulted in the formation of a "temporary organization of the St. Joseph Convention Hall", with John C. Wyatt, as Chairman.

Numerous fund raising events were held throughout the City during the next several months, and by August 18, 1903, the St. Joseph Auditorium Company was incorporated. The first officers were: David Heaton, President; J. G. Schneider, First Vice-President; John I. McDonald, Second Vice-President; Rufus Todd, Secretary; and Frank Moore, Treasurer.

The St. Joseph Auditorium Company was formed "to promote the erection and maintenance of an Auditorium or Convention Hall Building in the City of St. Joseph, Missouri, to be devoted to and used for Public entertainments, amusements, conventions and public assemblies of all kinds, to own, manage, and control the same and do all things necessary to carry out said purposes." The incorporation documents were filed for record August 28, 1903, in Incorporation Book 2, page 558 in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds of Buchanan County, Missouri.

Shortly thereafter, the property at 404 - 424 North Fourth Street was purchased from Mrs. Zeilda Forsee for the sum of Twenty Thousand Dollars (\$20,000). Mrs. Forsee took half of the purchase price in Auditorium Bonds, by cancellation of her subscription for building the hall hereinafter mentioned, according to the Warranty Deed dated October 20, 1903, and filed November 28, 1903 and recorded in Book 293, at page 374 in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds of Buchanan County, Missouri.

Three conditions were stated in the deed:

"(1) St. Joseph Auditorium Company within two years complete foundations for an Auditorium which shall occupy the whole of said premises and have a seating capacity of not less than 5,000, (2) Auditorium be completed within five years, and (3) that the premises within a period of twenty years from this date be not sold, mortgaged, or exchanged, in any manner whatever, except to secure a loan for building said Auditorium, which said loan shall not exceed \$50,000." In December, 1903, the Auditorium Company had One Hundred Thousand Dollars. Architect Edmond Jacques Eckel submitted plans for the structure, which were approved July 23, 1904. The plans were revised to provide for fireproof construction and were then approved in February, 1905. The construction

contract was let May 18, 1905. When the cornerstone was dedicated in a city-wide celebration on September 27, 1905, Mayor William Spratt not only declared the day, "City Auditorium Day", but urged all businesses to close so that their employees could participate in the celebration.

The structure was completed in 1908 and the gala opening, a week long "Festival of Music", was attended by commercial and social leaders, as well as citizens of the City. Seats cost from \$.15 to \$1.00, with box seat at \$1.50.

The Auditorium was operated by the St. Joseph Auditorium Association until the late 1930's, and during its heyday, "everyone who was anyone" on the theatrical circuits appeared on the stage. Many gala entertainment balls were held in the structure, and it was an immensely important factor of the social and cultural life of the City of St. Joseph.

An article in the People's Forum column of the January 23, 1932, issue of the St. Joseph Gazette, states there were two factions at the time the Auditorium movement was launched--one that was interested in a building primarily for horse show purposes, indoor circuses, etc., and the other that was more interested in an auditorium of a modern and adequate place for holding conventions, large gatherings and entertainments such as "Ben-Hur" and other spectacles that would not be possible in the average theater or playhouse.

The horseshow faction prevailed, which resulted in the arena and basement being planned for such. This was made possible by a movable stage with entrance from the outside which would permit horses and horse-drawn vehicles to enter from the street. The basement was planned with stalls for horses and live stock. No attention was paid at that time to stage equipment or scenery whatsoever, and the lack of a wooden floor was also a handicap.

Therefore, the first additional expense that occurred was the building of the hard wood floor, making it suitable and comfortable for seating large audiences and permitting balls, food shows, grand opera, and other indoor entertainments.

Next the demand for stage equipment to permit the hanging of scenery had to be met, which resulted in the installing of a gridiron in the loft of the stage.

Due to a lack of funds, the building committee was never able to put a ceiling in the building and this entirely destroyed its acoustic properties and made it totally unfit for musical entertainments and large meetings where speaking was part of the program. A temporary provision was made by a canvas ceiling that was allowed to remain for some time until this became so unsightly and an obstacle to renting the building for many large gatherings and created an urgent demand on the part of the public that something be done to improve its acoustic properties.

All of the above described instances caused the St. Joseph Auditorium Company to increase its indebtedness, and eventually become unable to pay its debts.

The Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company of Springfield, Massachusetts foreclosed, and purchased the property at a Trustees Sale for \$30,000, on October 28, 1937.

In 1938, the voters of the City approved a Forty Four Thousand Dollars (\$44,000) bond issue for the purchase and renovation of the structure. However, the City did not complete the acquisition until early 1941. The City paid a mortgage of Twenty-Four Thousand Dollars (\$24,000) to the Massachusetts Mutual Insurance Company, and then spent Twenty Thousand Dollars (\$20,000) on repairs. During the first five years of City ownership, the Auditorium was operated in the black.

Records in the Office of the City Clerk of the City of St. Joseph, Missouri, indicate events scheduled at the Auditorium included Jack Benny, and the Swing Bands of the 1940's, the March of Dimes Telethon with Stars. During the period of 1967 until its abandonment, other events included the Grand Old Opry, Missouri Western College Basketball, Lions Club Annual Pancake Festival, Kennel Show, Firemen's Ball, Policemen's Ball, Boat and Camping Show, Boxing, Gus V. Karras's Wrestling Matches, the Harlem Globetrotters, and The Christian Brothers Basketball Tourney.

The City of St. Joseph operated the Auditorium until 1978 when the St. Joseph Light and Power Company discontinued its utility of steam heat. A new Civic Arena was constructed.

Architectural Information:

The Auditorium is highly ornamented with glazed white terra-cotta; exterior walls are buff brick. The three bay entrance at the east facade is located in a shallow pavilion. The basement is ground level on the west, accessed by large doors on the west end of the north and south facades.

The structure is three stories with an arena floor of 70 feet by 150 feet. A 45 feet 6 inch by 74 feet stage was located in the north end of the arena. The construction of the stage was unique in that it was removable and had a ramp underneath it to reach the street level on the north side of the building.

The structural system consisted of reinforced concrete footings and foundation walls supporting a reinforced concrete and steel superstructure. Floors and ramps other than the arena floor and stage are reinforced concrete. The arena floor was hardwood.

The south facade had an auxiliary entrance and balcony supported by paired brackets at the first floor level. The west facade had three fire escapes with large double leaf doors.

Ceilings are acoustical tile. The roof deck is reinforced concrete around the outer perimeter with tar and gravel. Above the arena floor, the roof is pitched, with wooden rafters and sheathing, supported by steel columns and has selvedge composition roofing.

Two balconies provided fixed seating for 2,400; another 1,800 spectators could be seated on the arena floor. The balconies were accessed by a system of ramps.

At the south end of the arena, a 93 feet by 22 feet 1 inch Assembly and Banquet Room was located on the main floor. A kitchen was in the basement, with a circular stairway leading to the banquet room. There were fireplaces at each end of the banquet room.

The original structure had a cornice and pavilions at the four corners. A roof garden was accessed through the pavilions. The four pavilions and the cornice were removed after the City of St. Joseph took possession and conducted major renovations in the 1940's.

Eckel and Aldrich, Architects, drew the plans for this renovation. The canopies at the north and south facades were also removed.

During the last years of operation, the St. Joseph Municipal Court became headquartered in the former Assembly and Banquet Room.

Site and Surroundings:

The St. Joseph City Auditorium faces east on Fourth Street. On the east is the site of new City of St. Joseph/Buchanan County Law Enforcement Complex, which will be completed in 1986. The Auditorium is diagonally across the street from the National Register's Buchanan County Court House and one block north of the National Register's Wholesale District.

Project Information:

Plans call for the demolition of the St. Joseph City Auditorium in Summer, 1985. The historical documentation of the St. Joseph City Auditorium was completed by Sue Johnson, Grants Administrator of the Community Development Office, assisted by Ms. Nancy Sandehn of the Mo-Kan Regional Council, and John S. Grimes, a member of the Community Development staff.

Bibliography:

Historic Inventory of St. Joseph, Johnson, Johnson and Roy, Inc.

St. Joseph Gazette, September, 1905 and October, 1908 issues, and 1932-1978 period.

History of Buchanan County and the City of St. Joseph and Representative Citizens, compiled and edited by Chris L. Rutt, 1826 to 1904.

History of the Growth and Development of St. Joseph, by Nellie Utz and G. Marion Wilson